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*Performing and regulating 'Danishness'*

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# **Auto-communication and Micro-orientalism at the Shanghai Expo 2010 – Performing and regulating ‘Danishness’**

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## **Auto-communication and Micro-orientalism at the Shanghai Expo 2010 – Performing and regulating ‘Danishness’**

**Abstract:** Using the concepts of auto-communication and micro-orientalism, this article argues that nation branding at World Expos produces and propagates notions of difference and otherness. By use of the Danish ‘Welfairytales’ pavilion at the 2010 Expo in Shanghai, we show how national Self is performed in two versions. One attempts to communicate ‘the good Danish life’ to the Danes themselves, while the other claims Occidental superiority. The case shows how the Danish exhibition is performed and regulated as sustainable and authentic and how in spite of its seemingly dialogical and interactive layout, a number of auto-communicative and micro-orientalist practices are enacted.

**Key words:** World Expo, branding, micro-orientalism, auto-communication, performing the national, Otherness

### **Introduction**

There are many reasons why destinations are branded (Ooi, 2004). The brands are meant to modify the perceptions of global audiences. They also selectively package the positive elements of the destination into an attractive story. Destination brands are also place identities, around which various tourism industry players rally. Tourists and residents may use destination brands as gaze lenses, through which they selectively interpret and acquire an understanding of the place. Regardless, tacit behind these brands is how the brands are formulated in relation to how global audiences perceive the place. The world is heterogeneous. This also means that different people will have different perceptions of a destination. As mentioned, a destination brand attempts to focus people’s minds and provide a coherent and attractive story of the destination. This is easier said than done. The attempt to focus minds through a unique brand story is increasingly being complemented by the accreditation approach (Ooi 2011). The 2010 Shanghai Expo is an example of the branding of the city through the accreditation strategy. Let us elaborate.

There are at least three types of accreditation approaches to place branding. The first is to make use of globally-recognized and branded tourist attractions like Disneyland, and Guggenheim Museum to build up the appeal of the destination (Braun & Soskin, 1999; Nilsson, 2007). Shanghai will be the site for a Disney theme park, and has thus received a stamp of approval from this family-friendly attraction. As many cities want to host a Disney theme park, the choice of Shanghai indicates that it is now an important, stable and family-friendly tourist destination. It asserts the Chinese city's wholesome credentials, and complements the city's financial centre image. The second accreditation approach taps into promoting established and well-tested types of tourist attractions because these attractions communicate specific positive messages to global audiences (Florida, 2003; Harmaakorpi, Kari, & Parjanen, 2008; Knox, 2008; Mossberg & Getz, 2006; Slater, 2004). People are familiar with these types of products (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Prentice & Andersen, 2003; Weaver, 2005). For example, many attractions have taken on similar formats, such as film festivals, art biennales and pedestrian shopping streets. Using a similar formula and following the footsteps of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty, spectacular icons are built with the intention to symbolize places, e.g. the Pearl Tower of Shanghai and Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao. Art districts, such as 798 of Beijing and M50 of Shanghai, assert the art credentials of these cities. By having these attractions, they also communicate certain images of the place and promote certain activities in local society, such as generating more bubbly street life, celebrate local film culture and generate a more vibrant art scene. They thus contribute to and accredit the place with certain characteristics.

The third accreditation strategy is to host readily recognizable events and attractions. The Shanghai 2010 World Expo is an example. This accreditation approach makes use of significant and popular events (e.g. the Olympics, World Expositions and World Bank meetings) to draw attention to the place (Brown, Chalip, Jago, & Mules, 2002; Burgan & Mules, 1992; Green & Chalip, 1998; Smith, 2004). Singapore, for example, hosts the first and only Formula One night car races. The main reason for doing so is the branding of the city-state. Images of the illuminated skyline are telecasted across the world, pop singers perform and celebrities visit the city. As a result, the old

staid image of Singapore is being overshadowed by images of fast cars, famous celebrities and a spectacular night skyline presented in various global mass media channels (Ooi, 2011).

While the accreditation strategy brands a place, that same strategy can also be used to tarnish the destination. For example, because of the lack of democracy and the jailing of opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, some European governments, including France and the UK, boycotted the football games hosted by Ukraine during the Euro 2012 championship (Harding, 2012). Because of the attention given to such events, protesters can use the occasion to point out abuses. So for those protesting against the occupation of Tibet, there were similar calls for the boycott of the Shanghai Expo (Students for a Free Tibet, 2010).

In the context of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the city and China received well spread global support with the participation of over 200 nations and organizations and more than 70 million visitors. Like the 2008 Beijing Olympics, 2010 was a year of glory for the country. The event boosted Chinese domestic tourism and allowed millions of Chinese to visit the world without leaving their country. Towards an external audience, China asserted its soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007) but on the other hand, participating countries were also able to assert their soft power by presenting themselves at the Expo, providing “highlights” and boasting of their own achievements. In this paper, we will take a closer look at this phenomenon through the pavilion of one of the participating countries, namely Denmark. Denmark is no different. By doing so, we will discuss how the national pavilions perform an inwardly directed auto-communication, while also carrying out what we have termed micro-Orientalism through the practices of presenting the Self and the Other at the pavilion.

In the following, we look at the presentation of Self in the space of an Orientalized Other, that is how Denmark presents itself in the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. We first provide a short introduction to the history and current status of the World Expo before turning to the concept of Orientalism. We argue that events of accreditation such as a World Expo create a platform for two simultaneous – and equally important – processes of communication: an internal auto-communication in which national identity is asserted and an external process of communication, which we term as micro-orientalism. Using the Welfairytale pavilion as

example, we offer a critical analysis of Denmark as it is presented and performed as environmentally sustainable and authentic. We argue that in spite of the seemingly dialogical and interactive layout of Welfairytales, a number of auto-communicative and micro-orientalist practices are enacted simultaneously through the use of performances, discourses and the physical layout at the pavilion, all of which are subject to tight regulation. Our goal is to show how the presented-Self taking place in branding events such as a world Expo can be analysed as reflecting not only how the exhibitors think world should see Denmark, but *firstly* how the Danish exhibitors see and communicate Denmark in an introvert national context and *secondly* how they implicitly understand the external receiver, in which case an image of the Other becomes discernible.

### ***The Expo - background***

The first World Exposition was held in London in 1851 under the name of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations. Unlike the market and the fair trades from which it drew its inspiration, the international exhibitions, which would quickly succeed each other in the years to come, did not – at least directly – engage with the selling of goods. Rather their aim was to display novel products, tools and machines (Stoklund 1994). The international exhibitions of the time not only competed in displaying industrial goods and innovations. Gradually, the program of the exhibitions was expanded as the first purely economic concern was supplemented with displays related to culture and arts. In 1900, the concept of the ‘Street of Nation’ was introduced, on which the 58 participating nations could demonstrate their distinctiveness through exciting and spectacular pavilions (Glambek 1997:16). As such, the exhibitions became a powerful early media of visual communication (Stoklund 1993).

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the international fairs became highly influential and very popular. At its peak of popularity, the number of visitors rose from 6 million at the first London exhibition in 1851 to a staggering 50 million in 1900 in Paris. Partially due to their massive success, the world exhibitions may be seen as “one of the most crucial and fascinating cultural elements of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century” (Stoklund 1994). Also, these international fairs contributed to a development which Orvar Löfgren (1989) has termed “the international cultural grammar of nationhood”.

According to Stoklund (1994), the international exhibition of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, later on transformed into the Expos which we still know today, is characterised by a dual development of industry and national culture in which ‘industrial culture and the establishment of nation states were closely connected processes’ (p. 43). The exhibitions functioned in a two-tiered manner; first, as a way to display technical or industrial products, but also more generally one’s (preferably high) level of modernity and progress; second, as a way to differentiate ones nation-state and national culture from others.

Today, large Expos are still hosted worldwide every five years. The organisation of the Expos are supervised and regulated by the official body of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), which was established in Paris in 1928. The success and longevity of the Expos is explained by the capacity to combine its educational and non-commercial nature with a national urge for global attention, as explained by the former BIE president Ole Philipson:

‘With the arrival of globalization, the perception of a country’s identity has become more blurred in the mind of the public. Therefore, there is a growing need among many countries to promote themselves abroad and to show the world what they are, what they stand for and what they are capable of’ (Philipson 2010, not paginated).

But what is the purpose of today’s Expo? Question is whether the differentiating identified by Stoklund (1994) still takes place in a contemporary, post-industrial and post-colonial context at an Expo held in a developing country, as was the case at the Shanghai Expo of 2010. Do exhibitors still face and take on the double-edged challenge of displaying innovations according to international standards of progress and enterprise while highlighting their own national culture as unique? This question we will seek to answer by looking at how Denmark presented itself at the 2010 Expo to itself and to China.

Our assertion is that the Danish presented-Self reflects not only how exhibitors believe the world should see Denmark (as is the typical way to understand place branding), but also how Danes see themselves and what the exhibitors think of China. Hence, the article not only seeks to confirm the idea of the exhibitions as a place to contest on a universal ladder of modernity and progress and to assert uniqueness, but also as a – however implicit and tacit – way to communicate the ideas of Self and the Other. Before proceeding to a further analysis of how these processes were identified and studied at the Expo, we will provide a theoretical background for discussing the presented-Self, arguing how the present case displays auto-communication as well as emerging forms of Orientalism.

### **Auto-communicating: presenting the good Danish life to Danes**

The people behind the Danish pavilion, like those from other countries, have a particular challenge. It is necessary to stand out in the crowd. The assertion of uniqueness is an institutionalized global practice for celebrating national identity. This assumes that there are identities to preserve, maintain, seek out and celebrate. The search for such an identity involves at least two processes. The first is to communicate how one thinks of oneself. The second is to manage how the Other thinks and to shape the Other's perception. Scholars including Hall and du Gay (1996), Giddens (1991), Lash (1990) and Bauman (1996) accept that identities are never unified and are increasingly fragmented and fractured; they are never singular but variously constructed across different intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. Identities are subjected to radical historicisation and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from' but 'what we will become' or 'how we want to be represented'.

A way of communicating and managing identity which we wish to focus on in this article is auto-communication. According to Christensen (1997), auto-communication is 'the self-referential acts of communication that organizes a sender around its own perspectives and images' (p. 199), a way to recognize and communicate its own culture. In this case, auto-communication should be seen as the way in which Danish values and images are communicated not to visitors, but to a Danish audience. Although this self-



centered activity is not explicitly part of branding activities such as the Welfairytale exhibition at the Expo, we show here that it is very much part of the actual enactment of the pavilion.

### **Emerging forms of Orientalism?**

Following the critical footsteps of Foucault, Said (1979) interrogated and challenged Orientalist studies. Said entwined political and cultural imperialism and argued that Orientalists – ‘western’ writers and academics who study the ‘Orient’ – have misrepresented, and still misrepresent, the Middle Eastern Islamic world in a manner that has eased the way for the West to dominate the Orient. Said argued that Orientalism is not only an academic discipline but an ideological discourse inextricably tied to the perpetuation of western power. Said reasoned that many western scholars who study the Orient present and distribute particular images of the Orient, centred on the distinctiveness of the Oriental mind, as opposed to the Occidental mind. Such images create, essentialize and caricaturize the Orient, and the images do not correspond to empirical reality and reduce the significance of the varieties of language, culture, social forms and political structures in the so-called Orient. Hidden in the ideological underpinnings of Orientalism, the Orient is often imagined as inferior, despotic and uncivilized.

The logic and premises behind Said’s attack on Orientalism have inspired many scholars to think critically about how people imagine other societies, and how people inadvertently disperse particular geopolitical messages in their activities. Orientalist debates have been extended to the study of places like Africa (Jeyifo, 2000; Mazrui, 2000; Ash, 1989), East Asia (Clarke, 1997; Dirlik, 1996; Hill, 2000; Hung, 2003) and Eastern Europe (Kumar, 1992; Ash, 1989; Ooi, Kristensen, & Pedersen, 2004). Orientalism has also inspired scholars to look at how discourses have come to misrepresent and caricaturize the Other with regard to sex and gender (e.g. (Albet-Mas & Nogue-Font, 1998; Lewis, 1996; Mann, 1997; Prash, 1996), race and ethnicity (e.g. Jeyifo, 2000; Mazrui, 2000) and religion (e.g. (Amstutz, 1997; Burke III, 1998; Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002; Zubaida, 1995). Similarly, the North—South, Rich—Poor divides are seen as parallels to the Orient—Occident dichotomy. As a result, tacit and biased discourses are highlighted

by many anti-globalization lobbies as they protest against the political, economic, social and cultural domination of the West (Chua, 2003; Klein, 2000; Shipman, 2002). Tourism researchers like Clifford (1997), Echtner and Prasad (2004), Morgan and Pritchard (1998) (1998), Ooi (2004; 2005), and Silver (1993), have also drawn inspiration from Said.

Said's challenge against Orientalism is critical and political. Such a critical perspective identifies who benefits, who is subverted, who disseminates the Orientalist discourses, how the discourses are disseminated and the consequences of reifying the discourses. This approach thus identifies the messages transmitted and the embedded ideological meanings. In this perspective, all messages are seen as constructs that carry unequal relationships between the party that misrepresents the Other and the Other itself – words are chosen to load the presented messages, meanings are accentuated, while other meanings are selectively ignored.

To recapitulate, we will look in this paper at the presentation of Self in the space of an Orientalized Other, that is how Denmark presents itself at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. We argue that the presented-Self convey a two-fold image of 'what Denmark is like'. It reflects how the exhibitors see and communicate Denmark to other Danes and secondly, how the exhibitors perceive or imagine China, something which is visible through what we term micro-orientalism, that is concrete and situated practices of orientalism. To demonstrate this, we provide an account of the Danish contribution to the World Exposition of 2010 held in Shanghai. After a short description of the data collection process, we introduce the Welfairytales exhibition, its setup and main theme. We then continue with a close description of how two of the recurring themes at the Danish pavilion, sustainability and authenticity, were presented at the exhibition, arguing that how they were performed in fact led to simultaneous processes of auto-communication and micro-orientalisation. As shown, this takes place through various mechanisms of regulation and control, Self-presentation and Othering.

Through our analysis, we hope to show how Orientalism is translated in practice and how the apparent dialogical framework, which guides the overall Expo theme as well as the Danish contribution is in

fact less open and seamless when explored in detail. In fact, so-called interactive approaches to communicating Danishness in terms of sustainability and authenticity proved to be highly normative and asymmetric. Before venturing further into these discussions however, a short presentation of the research process and case is in order.

### **Data collection and case presentation: Welfairytale of Denmark at the Expo 2010**

In the summer of 2010, a two week field trip by the first author was carried out to the World Expo in Shanghai. Prior to the trip, the planning process of the Expo and the Danish pavilion had been followed through Danish and Chinese official websites and press coverage of the forthcoming event was monitored. Particularly the plan to move the Little Mermaid, an icon of Copenhagen and Danish tourism, to the Danish pavilion during the Expo generated interest as well as debate. A number of key players in the Danish administration were contacted as were people, who had been involved with the concept design. During the field trip, the pavilion was visited multiple times to collect onsite observations, touring it alone or walking along guided tours. Guides and officials working at or connected to the pavilion were interviewed as were a number of diplomats and people with experience in branding and marketing Denmark in China. All and all, this compact ethnographic approach used official documents and press releases, interviews, brochures and promotional material, news and video clips, observations and objects (the pavilion, the Little Mermaid, bicycles etc.) to investigate how nation branding is presented and performed in a concrete setting, the Danish Welfairytale pavilion at the Expo 2010.

The Expo held between May 1<sup>st</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup> 2010 in Shanghai is the first of its kind in a developing country. Still, according to Chinese authorities, the venue was to be the biggest World Exposition ever held, both in terms of visitors and size. Organisers forecasted 70 million visitors, 90% of them Chinese, to visit the over 5 km<sup>2</sup> Expo venue located in downtown Shanghai. Here, they would be able to explore the pavilions of approximately 200 nations and international organisations, 16 corporations and 60 urban best practice cases. Under the general theme of ‘Better City, Better Life’, organisers aimed for the Expo 2010 to be ‘a great event to explore the full potential of urban life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a significant period in urban

evolution<sup>i</sup>'. By promoting a theme of sustainable urban development, the endeavour of the Expo organisers was to spark innovation and interaction in order to

‘contribute to human-centred development, scientific and technological innovation, cultural diversity and win-win cooperation for a better future, thus composing a melody with the key notes of highlighting innovation and interaction in the new century<sup>ii</sup>’.

Prompted by the possibility of showcasing Denmark as a tourist destination and as an attractive place to work, study and invest to millions of Chinese visitors, the Danish government decided to enrol Denmark in the Expo in the summer of 2007. Shortly hereafter, a competition was arranged in order to secure an integrated design and concept for the Danish pavilion, which was backed by 150 million kroner (app. 15 million £) - the largest ever Danish budget for a World Exposition. Financing was secured through a joint venture between the Danish state, supporting half of the cost, and a number of large Danish companies (such as Mærsk, Carlsberg, Vestas a.o.) as well as a main sponsor, Realdania, a strategic foundation working with initiating and supporting projects improving the built environment.

A year later, in September of 2008, the winning project of Welfairytales was presented to the public. Under this project name - a combination of the words *welfare* and *fairy tales* - architects Bjarke Ingels Group, Arup engineering and the ideas agency 2+1 displayed a pavilion which in shape and content was to ‘brand Denmark as provider of welfare to the Chinese economic boom by showing how growth and lifestyle can be combined with sustainability and social responsibility’<sup>iii</sup>. Two themes presented to symbolise essential ‘Danish’ qualities to a Chinese Expo audience, were *sustainability* and *authenticity*.

In the following analytical section, we focus on these themes, showing how their communication and public accessibility can not only be seen as two-fold (internal as well as external), but also how the wish to ‘perform Danishness’ through these themes led to a number of regulations directed towards the public. In our scrutiny, we explore the exhibition concept of not just exhibiting but also ‘inviting in’ the public to experience Danishness at close hand which, as shown below, served as a through-going but difficultly manageable exhibition strategy.

### **Danish Green: Displaying, performing and regulating sustainable urban living**

The 3000 m<sup>2</sup> Welfairytale pavilion is shaped as a continuous geometrical loop. The visitor starts from ground level, walking upwards until reaching the roof top terrace and bicycle parking. This same track leads back into the pavilion curl to 'surface' once again before reaching the exit at ground level. On this ascending and declining path, natural ventilation is provided thanks to a large number of perforations in the outer steel walls. Along with the dominating white colour of the pavilion interior and the reflections from the turquoise waters of the central 'harbour bath', the ventilation system provides for a cool (in both senses of the word) almost maritime indoor feeling.

On the inner sides of the walk and cycle ways of the spiralling pavilion, visitors can watch the continuously running short films *Tales of how we live* portraying Danish urban daily life situations centred on cycling, water and family. The films are coarse-grained, poetic and impressionistic and along with the subtle background music, they stage a dreamy atmosphere heavily contrasting the hectic activity inside the pavilion. The urban setting presented to the visitor at the pavilion is populated with cycling and harbour bathing youngsters and families, showcasing sustainable life style, youth, good taste and success. No usual urban problems are visible or touched upon as sustainability and welfare are uncritically and seamlessly joined with Danish design, architecture, heritage and industry. The image presented is indeed a modern day fairy tale!

Something similar may be said about the stories - or tales - presented on a so-called *living fairy tale wall*. Displayed in texts and photo collages on the walls of the pavilion, these tales are built around three themes: *Tales of how we live*, *Tales of what we love* and *Tales of where we're going*. The tales are supplemented by a bright green booklet distributed to visitors. In the booklet, statements with headlines such as 'Cars are so last year, bikes are so right now' or 'The past is part of the future' provide inspiration to how sustainable transportation, urban development and heritage may become part of the sustainable city – as, is claimed, it has happened in Denmark.

The pavilion layout seeks to display a sustainable and green urban environment. Already in this introductory part of the exhibition, we are presented with a split message, divided into stories of (sustainable) everyday life very well-known to Danes and a presentation to (Chinese) visitors of Denmark. The subtle message is that Denmark a place of the future. Being environmentally sustainable is a goal China and most parts of the world should seek to strive for. Denmark is superior in this aspect as it has already reached this goal and level, as it is already in the future.

***‘The real deal’<sup>iv</sup>. Performing green***

One of the things however, which sets this exhibition apart is its ambition to provide the visitor with ‘the real deal’, as noted by the pavilion architect. A special characteristic of the Danish pavilion and the concept behind it is the attention given to performativity. The ambition of the organisers is not only to exhibit a sustainable Denmark, but also for the visitor to try it out. “Activities are exciting messages”, as stated by the pavilions commissioner general in an interview. On the website of the architect group behind the project, the performative approach is explained in the following way:

‘The Danish pavilion [...] should not only exhibit the Danish virtues. Through interaction, the visitors are able to experience some of Copenhagen’s best attractions, the city bike, the harbor bath, the nature and an ecological picnic [...] A harbor bath is located in the heart of the pavilion, filled with seawater from Copenhagen harbor’<sup>v</sup>.

The pavilion invites visitors to engage in a similar way as Danes are claimed to interact with urban space in their sustainable city (here: Copenhagen). Visitors get the chance to stick their toes in very clear water shipped all the way to Shanghai from the Copenhagen harbour, to have a rooftop picnic with organic Danish foods (for payment), to sit on the ‘social bench’ stretching around the loop shape of the pavilion or to bike around the pavilion. This creates the opportunity for guests to try some of the most sustainable aspects of Danish city life. Hence, the pavilion and its concept clearly seek to provide the visitor with an image of the ‘real deal’ of sustainable city life in Denmark - as opposed to a stale representation.

However, the performative layout of the pavilion concept was quickly challenged by a number of issues, which revealed to require extensive regulation.

### ***Regulating green***

To begin with, the exhibition project contained a number of interactive ideas as shown in the above. The pavilion was constructed so as to provide visitors with the opportunity to bike and to swim (or at least dip their toes) in real Copenhagen harbour water - just like the Danes. However, these initial ideas soon turned out to be difficultly implemented in practice. As explained by the pavilion director, the original idea of letting visitors dabble in the central harbour bath was cancelled as it was judged too dangerous by local security operators. According to them, most Chinese cannot swim for which reason the pool was fenced off even before the pavilion opened. Another security issue occurred shortly after the opening of the Expo, as the bicycles at the pavilion were forced to be withdrawn. In accordance with Danish 'bike lore', the bicycles had been equipped with foot brakes - unknown in China - and with only one front brake. After a few days in use on the relatively steep slopes of the spiral shaped pavilion, front brakes were either broken or completely rubbed down on most bikes, causing a number of crashes and accidents, most severely a broken leg.

After some time, the bikes were reintroduced with two handbrakes. However, a pavilion guide still exhibited concern of the Chinese cyclists, many of them unaccustomed with biking: *'I always tell them to go slower, even when they are going uphill'*. Precautions were continually made in order to avoid more accidents by asking people to slow down, requiring and handing out bicycle helmets, reducing the number of bikes from the original 1500 planned to a couple of hundreds and locking the bikes in case of rain and slippery conditions as well as during the midday heat of summer (in other words, most of the time).

The unfortunate accidents as well as the cancelling of the harbour bath illustrate that displaying sustainability through interaction with visitors in order to show 'the real deal', as was the explicit intention of the pavilion organisers, was subject to misconceptions and worries which led to thorough regulation. As seen, the misconceptions were primarily caused by presuming that seemingly 'natural' practices such as cycling and swimming in a Danish urban environment could be directly translated into a

pavilion and Chinese context. Also, the worries were based on an idea of the Chinese Other as unable to swim or as a poor cyclist, again in contrast to Danes, which were implicitly assumed to perform such activities without any problem.

These examples show that the performance of sustainability ‘the Danish way’ is subjected to a cultural and highly contextual translation at the pavilion. This was confirmed through discussions with Danish ex-pats in Shanghai, during follow-up interviews with Chinese living and working in Denmark and by simply observing Shanghai traffic. These conversations and observations show that transportation by bike carry radically different meanings to Danes and to the Chinese. Where to many Danes, bikes might be seen as an attractive, healthy or simply convenient means of transportation, the bicycle is a symbol of poverty to many Chinese. A bike signifies the inability to afford driving a car or taking public transportation. In the light of a warm and damp climate and fierce traffic, biking outside of the safe walls of the Expo also takes on a riskier meaning in Shanghai than in Danish urban areas, where installations such as cycle paths and separate traffic lights for bikes are common. Judging from the colour of Shanghai’s Huangpu River, one might also on a similar note wonder, whether a Chinese visitor could even remotely image the pleasurable in taking a swim in an urban harbour.

These examples illustrate the difficulties in providing a seamless translation of culturally embedded, normative and tacit Danish preconception of how to experience and perform urban sustainability, for instance through swimming or bicycling in a controlled and safe as well as ‘attractive’ manner. Safety and cultural connotations such as attractiveness were not part of the way swimming and biking was communicated at the pavilion. This was due to the fact that these practices were not seen as being in fact *culturally invested objects*. The Danish way of practicing (and communicating) sustainable city life through bicycling and harbour baths conflicted on site as the lack of cultural and practical knowledge and context clashed with normative ideals and discourses. Rather, a tacit auto-communication of Danish logics took place which clashes with local practices, reinforcing ideas of the unskilled Chinese Other which again led to the reinforcement of regulation. This demonstrates how branding practices, on-site practicalities, cultural discourses and power intertwine in different, often unforeseen ways in concrete settings. Through situated



practices of micro-orientalism, they enable self-centred stories of Self and risk identifying the Other as unable or unfit to participate.

### **Authentic Denmark: On why ‘we cannot just send a copy to China’**

Already before the opening, the Danish pavilion, or rather the Little Mermaid, received intense coverage from the Chinese media. There is no doubt that one of, if not *the* most important attraction at the Danish pavilion was the statue of Little Mermaid, due to the celebrity of the author of the fairy-tale on which it is created, namely author Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875). The fairy-tale author is by many considered as one of the most famous foreign authors in China as his stories are read in school all over China and cherished by children of all ages. It is therefore most likely that the Mermaid is the reason for the intense interest from both press and visitors, as over 6 million visitors (more than the double of what was expected) queued up to view the Mermaid. On the website of the architect group behind the project, the architects motivate the idea of moving the Little Mermaid to Shanghai in the following way:

‘the original Little Mermaid visiting China as a specific example of the idea that the Danish pavilion offers the real experience of the real Danish city life’

Once again, the real deal is provided as a motivation to exhibit a true Danish icon. Next to sustainability, this notion of originality or more precisely *authenticity* worked as a second through-going theme at the pavilion. Just like the exhibition’s intention of showing actual contemporary urban living (as opposed to ‘old-fashioned’ staged and stale representations), the claim for authenticity was also noticeable in the wish to bring the real Mermaid statue and real harbour water from Copenhagen. As we will show, the idea of being authentically Danish was linked to a number of other positive traits such as originality and ingeniousness which was (more or less tacitly) contrasted to a Chinese Other, presented as more superficial (i.e. less real) and less ingenious. However, as we will now show, these claims of Danish authenticity were only difficultly upheld and also in some ways seemed to contrast the other marker of Self, sustainability.

### ***Danish authenticity and the Chinese copycats***

One of the questions that arose in public debate before moving the Little Mermaid to China was why Denmark did not just send a copy. During an interview at the Expo, a prominent member of the pavilion staff argued against this thought, saying that by sending the real statue, Denmark could set a good example. The ingenuity behind moving the mermaid to China was to display, that in order to show respect vis-à-vis a trading partner, one does not send copies. Through this claim, the Danish representative was clearly referring to a reputation of China exporting copies of (western) designer goods and technological products. By bringing the Little Mermaid to Shanghai, not only did Denmark seek to claim authenticity and quality, themes that was strongly recognisable in the Danish local debate preceding the Mermaids trip to Shanghai. It also pointed to its creative superiority. The implicit claim was that Denmark does not have to copy others because of the advanced level of creativity and originality in the country.

In spite of the fact that the Danish tourism industry has struggled for years to overcome and transgress the fairy tale image linked to Hans Christian Andersen and the Little Mermaid – and that using these two to heavily market Denmark in China is perhaps not the most original and future-oriented approach to nation branding, the self-understanding of Denmark as original was retrievable throughout the Welfairytale concept. Even the Danish authorities want to move away from the fairy tale images while promoting the country to the Chinese (Ooi 2008). Admittedly, the original and consistent concept was prized nationally and internationally for its interesting and thorough narrative. The exhibition also received many visits from engineers during its construction. However, when talking to stakeholders engaged in the day-to-day use of the pavilion, they would express discontent with the quality of many of the amenities. Whereas architects and project staff commended the ingenuity of its design, lower staff members lamented toilet and showering facilities, while corporate partners complained about the poor access to and quality of VIP areas. Although officials would blame the Chinese workers and materials for the low quality finish, many alterations were in fact enforced later in the building process due to the building inability to live up to sustainability criteria, criteria which had originally been set up by the Chinese hosts to fit the overall sustainability theme. This lack of sustainability ultimately resulted in a bronze medal (as opposed to the expected Gold or Silver medal) at the Bureau International des Expositions awards.

Another case in which the authenticity of the concept seemed to clash with the notion of sustainability was the harbour water. Already in the early project descriptions, the architects envision how genuine harbour water shipped from Denmark could be used to illustrate what a clean urban environment, in this case water, could look like. However, very soon, this (righteously very unsustainable) idea of shipping tons and tons of 'real' harbour water for the sake of authenticity was abandoned, showing that other requirements, such as economy and manageability also play a role and may potentially clash in the practical implementation of a concept.

***Negotiating authenticity: The challenge of managing the real***

Just as the sustainability theme, the concept of authenticity was connected to a number of different interests and requirements set by Danish and Chinese stakeholders. As shown, these interests and requirements challenged the pavilion's ability to carry out a conclusive enactment of authenticity and originality and also questioned its contradistinction to the copy-cat and low quality Chinese Other. Although many good attempts to offer a 'real deal', as stated by lead architect Bjarke Ingels, the reality of the pavilion is not equally accessible - or assessable - to Danes as to Chinese. As many of the above examples show, translation of or a guide to doing things in the correct Danish way seemed constantly needed as exemplified by the issue of cycling or harbour swimming. The on-site interactions were subject to regulation and monitoring to ensure a correct or safe behaviour.

The efforts to exhibit a 'real deal' of Denmark as green and authentic showed to be subject to a number of management procedures and also to carry two communicative strings: one which told stories about Danish everyday life to Danes and one which through practices of micro-orientalism implicitly constructed a Chinese Other as unable to perform sustainability and authenticity the appropriate way. The 'correct' Danish ways of living in and with the city in the Welfairytale pavilion was continuously seen as challenged or endangered by other, less correct ways of interpreting or performing Danishness.

From the perspective of Self-presentation and auto-communication, the Welfairytale pavilion can be seen very much like a museum. According to Clifford, museums function as 'contact zones' (Clifford,

1997: 188-219) that is sites where geographically and historically separate groups establish ongoing relations. Clifford examines the ways 'primitive' societies are represented in 'civilized' museums; they reflect an ongoing ideological matrix that governs how 'primitive' societies respond to and are perceived by 'civilized' people through these museums. Museums construct the Other under their own assumptions and worldviews, and the Other re-imagines oneself in, and responds to, the exhibitions. In a similar way the exhibition can be seen as a site for people to reflect on who they are, while the ideological matrix behind the identities presented is partly shaped through micro-orientalism by imagining and here also regulating the performances of the Other. In the case of the Shanghai Expo, we argue that it constructs the Self, and invites the Other (visitors) not only to see, but also try out the 'real deal' of the superior Denmark.

The presentation and negotiation of the Danish pavilion values and actual state suggest that the things displayed at the pavilion could also be seen as taking on a role as what Star and Griesemer (1989) have termed 'boundary objects'. These are objects serving as boundaries and crossing points between different groups with different cultures and providing or sparking flexibly translated realities. Examples of such multi-interpretable objects could be the bicycles and Little Mermaid, whose meanings and context were continuously challenged and (re)defined by stakeholders. To the Chinese visitors, the Mermaid represented the much-loved fairy tales of Andersen, to the concept creators and officials she was a token of authenticity and contrasted to (Chinese) copies. The pavilion itself could also be seen as such an object, where the original concepts of sustainability and authenticity were not entirely compatible with practices actually taking place at the pavilion. The macro-level branding intentions did not smoothly fit with on-site realities at the Expo. Neither did the usual demarcation between the Danish Self as sustainable and authentic against a Chinese Other.

### **Conclusions: Branding Danish everyday and design – lost in translation?**

In this article, we have shown first how the Danish organisers presented the pavilion and its underlying stories through explicit auto-communicative stories and implicit cultural and practical codes of conduct and regulation. In the context of a major branding exercise such as Welfairytales, a relevant question

to pose is how external communication is carried out, something which was also addressed through the concept of micro-orientalism. The incidents analysed in the above raise the question of who the exhibition was in fact seeking to communicate to and of how the cultural content imbedded into the performances and discourses of the exhibition assumed a certain type of Other as receptor.

In spite of its undisputable success with attracting millions of visitors, the pavilion suffers, as some have pointed to, under a lack of cultural translation. According to a former consul in China, this can be explained by the screening process of the pavilion competition, which was organised to find a suitable concept and design. Here, the presented concepts, all conceived by Danish companies, are presented to and reviewed by an all-Danish jury. Because of such a selection process and committee, the winning concept is most likely to be the one appealing the most to Danish taste, ideas and sense of self.

However, as pointed out by the diplomat, branding Denmark to a Chinese audience should also include considerations on Chinese cultural references, preferences and tastes – something which a competition with Danish entrants and judges can only partially or remotely take into account. An example which illustrates this lack of translation is the Danish penchant for minimalistic design, which is strongly reflected in the pavilion architecture. Along with the tales of the pavilion focusing on Danish everyday life such as commuting on a bike, walking through the city and even swimming, this creates a concept which might come across as either too strange or too boring and unspectacular as it strongly departs from a Chinese taste for bright colours and glorious narratives.

Another last pointing to the lack of efforts to carry the concept across into a Chinese linguistic and cultural frame of reference is the English name title of Welfairytale, playing on the words of welfare and fairy tales. This name proved untranslatable, not only due to the incorporated play of words (which does not work in Danish either) but also because welfare, as pointed to by several commentators and pavilion employees contains negative connotation to the state in Chinese. Instead, the name of *Dreams of the city* was chosen to name the pavilion in Chinese, a name baring no references to the concept connecting sustainable

urban living and individual welfare. This raises the question of why a more appropriate Chinese title way not conceived in the first place.

The case has served to show how even with its universal message of global challenges and solutions the 2010 Expo in Shanghai created a platform for a national pavilion to reinforce ideas of Self and Other. This was done through a dual process; offering predominantly auto-communicating stories of the Danish Self and activities as sustainable and authentic, while simultaneously portraying the Chinese Other as lagging behind in terms of originality and unfit to perform sustainability in the correct way – at least not without intense regulation and control. In the context of public diplomacy and soft power, the competition amongst countries is not one that is clear and transparent. While the world power balance is shifting, the world has become more sensitive to differences and people are more respectful to and knowledgeable of other countries, this case illustrates that processes of orientalism continue to this day even though its rhetoric is less poignant.

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<sup>i</sup> From <http://en.expo2010.cn/a/20081118/000007.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> From <http://2plus1.dk/english/>

<sup>iv</sup> From the project presentation material (DECA 2008:7)

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.big.dk/projects/xpo/>